

Message Text

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SUBJECT: FINANCE MINISTER CALLS ON TEACHERS TO RECONSIDER STRIKE

REFERENCE: KINGSTON 3457

1. SUMMARY: SIXTEEN THOUSAND TEACHERS WENT ON STRIKE FOR HIGHER SALARIES ON APRIL 20. FINANCE MINISTER ERIC BELL, IN A NATIONWIDE BROADCAST ON APRIL 19, APPEALED TO THE NATION'S TEACHERS TO RECONSIDER THEIR DECISION, NOTING THAT TEACHERS WERE NOT ENTITLED TO A SALARY REVISION IN THE COMING FINANCIAL YEAR AND THAT THE COUNTRY COULD NOT AFFORD ANY INCREASES AT THIS TIME.
END SUMMARY.

2. SOME 16,000 PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS WENT ON STRIKE ON APRIL 20 DEMANDING PAY INCREASES OF J\$20 PER WEEK. AN ESTIMATED 90 PERCENT OF THE SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED. THE JAMAICA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION, WHOSE MEMBERSHIP NUMBERS 16,448 OF THE ISLAND'S 18,551 PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS, DECLARED THAT THE STRIKE WILL CONTINUE UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT ACCEDES TO THEIR CLAIMS.

3. IN A NATIONWIDE BROADCAST ON APRIL 19, FINANCE MINISTER ERIC BELL NOTED THAT TEACHERS, LIKE OTHER PUBLIC SERVANTS, HAVE BEEN ON A THREE-YEAR PERIODIC UNCLASSIFIED

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SALARY REVISION. TEACHERS, EDUCATION OFFICERS AND NURSES HAVE HAD THEIR SALARIES REVISED EVERY THREE YEARS. THEY WERE GRANTED INCREASES IN 1976 AND ARE NEXT ENTITLED TO AN INCREASE IN 1979. HE NOTED THAT THE TEACHERS HAD RECEIVED A \$1,200 PER YEAR ACROSS-THE-BOARD PAY INCREASE IN 1976 "WHICH IS NOT A SMALL SUM WHEN COMPARED WITH THE INCREASES WHICH OTHER PUBLIC

SERVANTS HAVE SUBSEQUENTLY RECEIVED".

4. MR. BELL NOTED THAT THE TEACHERS' CASE WAS COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT IN JUNE, 1976 THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION HAD ADVISED THEM THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD BE WILLING TO CONSIDER REPRESENTATION FROM THE JAMAICA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION FOR SALARY IMPROVEMENTS BEYOND THOSE AGREED UPON IN 1976 WITH A VIEW TO IMPLEMENTATION IN 1977-78 IN THE EXPECTATION "THAT THE ECONOMIC POSITION OF THE COUNTRY WILL HAVE IMPROVED SUFFICIENTLY BY THEN TO ENABLE THE GOVERNMENT TO FINANCE SUCH INCREASES AS MIGHT BE AGREED UPON". THIS CONDITION, HOWEVER, OBVIOUSLY WAS NOT MET.

5. THE MINISTER NOTED THAT "WE HAVE EMBARKED UPON ANOTHER DIFFICULT FINANCIAL YEAR. IN THE PAST FEW YEARS PRODUCTION HAS BEEN DECLINING AND CONSUMPTION HAS REPRESENTED TOO HIGH A PERCENTAGE OF THE GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT. AS A CONSEQUENCE, THE PRESENT STATE OF THE ECONOMY HAS NOT ALLOWED FOR THE CREATION OF ADEQUATE SAVINGS, INVESTMENT, EXPANSION, THE INCREASE OF JOBS AND INCREASE IN PRODUCTION OF GOODS AND SERVICES".

6. "IN THE PRESENT FINANCIAL YEAR THERE HAS TO BE A RESTRAINT OF OUR RECURRENT EXPENDITURES AND IMPROVEMENTS UNCLASSIFIED

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IN THE DIRECTION AND PACE OF CAPITAL EXPENDITURES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR. THE STRATEGY MUST BE TO INSURE EXPANSION IN BOTH THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE SECTORS ... TO INSURE THE SUCCESS OF THIS STRATEGY WE MUST BE ABLE TO CONTAIN THE INCREASES PAID TO THOSE ALREADY EMPLOYED WITHIN REASONABLE LIMITS". THE MINISTER CONCLUDED BY APPEALING NOT ONLY TO TEACHERS BUT ALSO TO ALL THOSE WHO HELD JOBS TO UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR RESTRAINT.

7. COMMENT: WHILE PAY APPEARS TO BE THE MAJOR CAUSE OF THE DISPUTE, THE APPALLING LACK OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND THE JAMAICA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION HAS LED TO STRAINED RELATIONS AND LOWER TEACHER MORALE. THIS APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO THE IMPASSE.

THE TEACHERS' STRIKE IS ONLY ONE IN A LONG SERIES OF STRIKES IN JAMAICA. EARLIER STRIKES INVOLVED WORKERS IN SUGAR, CEMENT, INSTANT COFFEE, FURNITURE, CIGARETTES AND FLOUR MILLS. IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR, STRIKES INVOLVED WORKERS AT KINGSTON PORT AND THE OPERATORS OF URBAN BUSES.

UNLESS THE GOVERNMENT CAN INSPIRE CONFIDENCE AND BRING
THE SERIOUS ECONOMIC SITUATION UNDER CONTROL, STRIKES AND
OTHER MANIFESTATIONS OF DISCONTENT WILL CONTINUE. THE
DIFFICULTIES THE GOJ OBVIOUSLY HAS IN DEALING WITH THE
UNIONS underscore the political problems which would
follow from the adoption of a necessary and rigorous
stabilization programm. IRVING

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